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DE RUEHVB #0046/01 0231339
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FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8495
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ZAGREB 000046

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, OSD FOR WINTERNITZ

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/23/2018
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S JANUARY 21 MEETING WITH PM SANADER

Classified By: Ambassador Robert A. Bradtke for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. During a January 21 meeting, the Ambassador and Prime Minister reviewed a range of bilateral and regional issues, including the PM's intention to invite President Bush to visit after the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the prospects for an invitation at Bucharest to join NATO, key items requiring further progress for membership, and finishing work on the Status of Forces Agreement. In a sign of the importance Sanader attaches to relations with the U.S. as he begins his second term, he was accompanied by all of the new key players on his foreign policy team: the new Ministers of Defense (Branko Vukelic) and Foreign Affairs (Gordan Jandrokovic); the new State Secretary for the MFA, Bianca Matkovic (formerly Sanader's chief of staff); Ambassador to NATO Davor Bozinovic; Sanader's new chief of staff, Katerina Fucek; and foreign policy advisor Steve Brkic. End Summary.

Invitation to President Bush

¶2. (C) Sanader said that he was very pleased by President Bush's recent letter of congratulations on his reappointment as Prime Minister and will respond with a letter inviting the President to visit Croatia after the NATO Summit in Bucharest. Recalling the A-3 meeting with the President in Tirana last year, Sanader stressed how much he values his relationship with the President and how much it would mean to him personally and to Croatia to have the President visit. President Bush, Sanader said, "is a great friend of Croatia," and would be accorded an extremely warm public reception.

NATO

¶3. (C) An upbeat Sander said that he had just concluded a meeting with President Mesic, during which he and Mesic agreed on a number of personnel changes (reported septel) and that the State Committee on NATO would convene shortly to develop an action plan for the next two months in the lead up to the NATO Summit in Bucharest and Croatia's anticipated invitation. The Committee would step up NATO public affairs efforts, marshaling Croatian national TV and radio as well as Nova TV and RTL to raise public awareness of and support for Croatia's NATO membership. Among other initiatives, a television crew would be sent to Afghanistan to interview Croatian soldiers serving there in order to educate the public about Croatia's growing role in international peacekeeping efforts.

¶4. (C) Sanader reported that the final NAC review of Croatia's Membership Action Plan last week in Brussels went very well and that he had a positive conversation with Ambassador Nuland on Croatia's accession prospects. Noting that Croatia's NATO membership would depend not just on the invitation but on the ratification process as well, the Ambassador reminded Sanader that Croatia must continue to

work hard on issues such as public support for NATO membership, property restitution, war crimes trials and refugee returns. Sander agreed, promising that "we will continue beyond Bucharest."

15. (C) With respect to refugee returns, Sanader noted that the GoC had already entered into an extensive coalition agreement with the SDSS, the Serb party in the coalition, on this issue. Further, he had brought a member of the Serb minority into the government for the first time in Croatia's history to serve as a Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for refugee returns. With respect to the rule of law, Sanader indicated that a new State Secretary position had been created within the Ministry of Justice to address judicial reform. On the issue of war crimes, Sanader said simply, "don't worry," assuring the Ambassador that his commitment to bringing to trial those accused of war crimes would continue.

16. (C) In a brief discussion about the status of the other A-3 NATO aspirants, Sanader expressed his hope that Macedonia and Albania would also be invited to join NATO at Bucharest, and asked the Ambassador about their prospects. The Ambassador noted that as President Bush had said in Tirana, the U.S. wanted to see all of the A-3 countries join NATO, provided they met NATO's performance-based criteria. The Ambassador added that Macedonia's dispute with Greece over the issue of its name may pose an additional problem for that country. Sanader said that he had urged the Macedonians to be "flexible" and consider a "constitutional change" in order to get a NATO invitation. He also asked the Ambassador whether he thought that he should accept the Macedonian PM's invitation to an upcoming conference in memory of the late President Boris Trajkovski in Skopje. The Ambassador

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supported Sanader's participation in this event and engagement with Macedonia.

Other Bilateral Issues

17. (C) The Ambassador urged that the government give its final approval to the status of forces agreement, now that all the substantive and translation issues seemed to have been resolved. He suggested that the agreement could be signed on the margins of the A-3 Defense Ministerial meeting in Washington in February. Sanader admitted that he had not yet reviewed the final text of the SOFA agreement, which is expected to be approved by the government in the next week or two. However, he did not anticipate any difficulties and reacted positively to the Ambassador's suggestion of a Washington signing in February.

18. (C) On the Open Skies Agreement being negotiated by the U.S. and Croatia, the Ambassador expressed that hope that remaining issues could be resolved and that this agreement also could be signed soon. The PM was not aware of the status of the Open Skies Negotiations, but promised to have the relevant Ministries follow up.

Kosovo

19. (C) In a brief concluding exchange on Kosovo, the Prime Minister reiterated Croatia's support for moving ahead with the Ahtisaari plan and Croatia's readiness to recognize Kosovo's independence after the U.S. and the majority of EU countries had done so.

BRADTKE